



A signature on a "Swing" letter from this time

### John Alexander – Writer Of A “Swing” Letter

Apprehension of “Swing” – at length there is some clue to the detection of at least one of these mysterious threatening-letter writers. A Mrs. Chandler, of Church Farm, Pewsey, Wilts, having received a letter, intimating that her house would be burnt to the ground unless she remitted £10 in a letter addressed to X.Y.Z. at the Nag’s Head, James Street, Covent Garden, that lady immediately forwarded it to Bow Street Office. Sir R. Birnie desired a £10 note to be enclosed in a letter, and left at the house, and ordered Dodd, an active officer of the establishment, to wait there and secure any individual who might inquire for the letter. It had been previously ascertained that a man, accompanied by a recruiting Serjeant of Dragoons, had asked if any letter to that address had arrived; and on Thursday morning he again called, and being told such a letter was received, with 2s 3d to pay in postage, he went away, not having so much money about him. About three o’clock he went again, accompanied by the Serjeant, by whom he had been enlisted, and who lent him the money, and paid the amount of postage, and received the letter. He was then secured by Dodd, and taken to Bow Street. Dodd detailed the whole of the transaction as far as he was concerned; and W. Clark, Serjeant of the 14th Light Dragoons, said he had enlisted the prisoner, who in the morning asked him to lend 5s as a letter containing money had arrived from the country, and he had not sufficient to pay the postage; he did so, and on receiving the letter, he told the Serjeant, “it was all right.” The prisoner, upon being asked if he wished to say anything in explanation of the charge, denied all knowledge of the letter, and added, that he should say nothing at present. He was then asked to sign his name, which he did, and the hand-writing was deemed to be precisely similar to that in which the letter signed “Swing” was written.

The prisoner was remanded until Monday next, to give time for the attendance of his prosecutrix, and other witnesses from Wiltshire. He was conveyed to the House of Correction, Cold Bath Fields. There is good reason for believing that the prisoner has been deeply implicated in the burnings and destruction of property, which have taken place in Wiltshire.

**Monday** - John Alexander (the prisoner) was brought forward before Sir R. Birnie and Mr. Mallard, in order to be finally examined.

The prisoner was defended by Mr. Wooler, and a professional gentleman appeared for the prosecution. Mrs. Chandler was then called forward, and stated, that on Tuesday last, the 11th instant, the letter now produced was handed to her by one of her servants, who stated that it came by post. On receiving it, she was advised to go to the postmaster at Marlborough, and having consulted with that person and a Mr. Lewis, she was advised to write a letter enclosing a shilling, and directed it to X.Y.Z., Nag’s head, James Street, Covent Garden, till called for. She did not know the handwriting of the letter addressed to her, signed “Swing.”

Caroline Dear, a little girl in the service of Mrs. Chandler, proved that on Tuesday morning, the 11th instant, she received from the general post boy the letter now produced, addressed to her mistress, and paid 9d postage for it. She handed the letter to her mistress immediately after she had so received it. Mr. Matthew Loe, of No 27, Southampton Row, Bloomsbury, deposed that he was in the service, as commission agent, of Messrs. Henry Barnett and William Avery, silk merchants, of No 10, Cateaton Street, city. The prisoner had lived as porter with the same firm for 6 or 7 years, and left his situation some time in last November. The letter now produced, signed "Swing," was written, to the best of his (witness's) belief, by the prisoner.

The prisoner said that, being under the instructions of his solicitor, he should reserve his defence to a future opportunity, when he should satisfactorily prove his entire innocence of the offence laid to his charge. The witnesses were then bound over and the prisoner was fully committed to Salisbury for trial. He is a man about 35 years of age, rather decent in appearance, and apparently shrewd and intelligent.

**Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, 20 January 1831**

## Sending a Threatening Letter

John Alexander stood indicted for sending a threatening letter to Anne Chandler, who resides at Church Farm, Pewsey, with intent to extort money from her by intimidation. From the evidence, it appeared that a letter to this effect was received by the prosecutrix; "I request that you will, by return of post, send me £10, or else your house shall be levelled to the ground very shortly, as I know that you can very well afford to spare that sum for a short time, until I can have effects to pay it back. Keep this a secret, or it will be the worse for you, as I have spies in your neighbourhood. "SWING."

The postscript directed the answer to be sent to the Nag's Head public-house, James Street, Covent Garden, addressed to XYZ. The prosecutrix, the moment she received this letter, consulted the postmaster of Pewsey as to what was to be done, and it was resolved that an answer should be sent, enclosing a shilling, and directed as mentioned above. This was done, and information of the matter was sent to Bow Street about it, and Dodd, the officer, lay in wait at the house for the prisoner, whom he took into custody the moment he saw he claimed the letter. The hand-writing of this letter was proved to be the prisoner's.

The jury found him guilty.

Mr. Justice Parke, in sentencing the prisoner, told him that it was a fortunate event for him that the party had not sent him the £10, for then his offence would have been a capital one, and the extreme rigour of the law would have taken its course. The practice of sending threatening letters of this description had of late caused so much terror amongst families in the country, that the fullest punishment which the law inflicted in such a case ought to be extended to it. He should therefore sentence him, for this offence, to be transported for life.

In the course of the trial it came out that the prisoner is grand nephew of the prosecutrix; that at the time he wrote the letter he was in great want of money, and that he had gone into the 14th Light Dragoons before he received the answer to his letter.

**Chester Courant, Tuesday, 22 March 1831**

### **OPC Note:-**

John Alexander, aged 28, convicted of sending a threatening letter, was transported to Van Diemen's Land on board the "Lord William Bendinct", arriving there 29 Aug 1832. Tasmanian records show he had a bad conduct record there, and was still a convict in October 1846.